

KAMALA DAS'S LIFE & WORKS: PROGRESSION FROM PHYSICALITY TO SPIRITUALITY

BHARTI NAGPAL¹ & JYOTI SHARMA²

¹Research Scholar, MRIU & Assistant Professor, Echelon Institute of Technology, Faridabad, Haryana, India

²Research Guide & Assistant Professor (FET), Manav Rachna International University, Faridabad, Haryana, India

ABSTRACT

A lot of labor has been put to exhibit in the Indian English Literature the strapping as well as scrawny attempts of females to fight for individual autonomy, right of education and expression and against gender stereotypes, domestic violence, sexism and male dominance. It is against such injustices in families and societies that feminists like Kamala Das fight against. Das in her works firmly establishes herself as a desiring female searching for love who is suffused with unwanted physical relationships but has the endless desire to carve a separate individuality in a world that rarely understands her. At the same time she conveys that the ultimate solace is in spirituality and accepting the God as an ideal lover. The present paper says a pointed attention in depicting Das's progression from physicality to spirituality - all marching towards quenching an endless thirst for inner and eternal satisfaction. In the present paper an attempt has also been made to describe Kamala Das as a confessional poet vigorously voicing for her female identity who rejects the orthodox masks and refuses to accept the limitations of her biology.

KEYWORDS: Reproductive, Stereotypes, Individuality, Physicality, Orthodox, Biology

INTRODUCTION

Modern Indian English Poetry which emerged at the time of the finish of colonialism has been a very challenging form of literature, as it is highly complex form of literature. Kamala Das is one the poets of this era who has contributed to Indian English literary world by opening a new landscape of human nature, man woman relationship and socio political consciousness. Kamala Das performs anatomy on her own female psyche by depicting her bitter sex experiences minutely, vividly and candidly in her poetry. Her own self emerges so powerfully in her poetry that even the orthodox system, lying concealed under the social artificiality, is totally punctured by her powerful assault. The poetic journey of Kamala Das is a journey from physicality to spirituality, from finite to infinite. Das is one of the best known contemporary Indian women writers, popularly known as a confessional writer and a rebel poet. Writing in two languages, English and Malayalam, she has authored many autobiographical works and novels, several well received collection of poetry in English, numerous volumes of short stories, and essays on a broad spectrum of subjects.

DISCUSSIONS

Sex and love are the major themes that predominate the poetry of Kamala Das. Her poetry is largely confessional which the expression of her frustration of loveless marriage is. Her marriage was an absolute failure because her husband while satisfying her sexual desire considered love as skin communicated thing. Her husband was a believer of sex as a matter of routine and she therefore by no means starved for the real pleasure of sex. "He did not provide her with sexual gratification to an even greater extent than she could have desired; But the love act with him was a kind of mechanical and

routine act which always felt her dissatisfied.”(Lal, 2006: 15) “Her husband coldness in this respect led her to feel acutely dissatisfied and discontented in life and, finding no real love even in her extra marital relationship, she slid into a life sexual anarchy, with one lover following another.” (Lal, 2006: 1)

The poem “The Looking Glass” is one of the famous poems by Kamala Das which shows that women should not indulge in self-discovery but in self-exposure and that too in physical terms. She suggests women about how to get the maximum possible pleasure out of the sexual act. A woman should not feel hesitate for expressing her sexual requirements. Besides she should not feel shy about admiring a male partner’s body and limbs. “These new fashions intoxicate the sensuous hunger in male and female and in the madness of physical momentary joy and pleasure, all have now forgotten the pious marriage relation between husband and wife.....The woman should feel his (husband’s) ego by admiring the details that make him male.”(Dube, 2013: 2):

“.....Admit your
Admiration, notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,
Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
Urinate. All the fond details that make
Him male and your only man.”

In this poem the poetess urges every woman to gift her lover all that makes her a woman. “In the following lines Das presents physiological details with rather startling candor with a concealed post colonial feminist agenda to expose patriarchal expectations about woman as quintessence of physicality (Ahmed, 2005: 67):”

“.....Gift him all,
Give him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hunger.....”

The theme of love in Kamala Das’s poetry has always been a multi dimensional phenomenon. On one side she sought emotional gratification through the marital relationship but on another side she never ashamed of her sexual desire and admits it frankly. Her definition of love is entirely different as she feels that the foundation of ideal marital relationship is beyond physicality and through physicality as explained in her poem “Ghamshyam”:

“We played once a husk game, my lover and I,
His body needing mine.
His ageing body in its pride needing the need for mine
And each time his lust was quietened.”

Then there is another poem entitled "Convicts" that depicts the physical love in term of physical effort and heat. It also depicts the physical act as a deeply sensuous and intense experience. The poem expresses the violent sexual experience between both of them:

"That was the only kind of love,
This hacking each other's parts,
Like convicts hacking, breaking clods
At noon. We were earth under hot Sun."

The richly evocative poetic passage tells us about that pleasure experienced by her in the company of her lover. The sensuous physical act involves energy and heat. But "on the part of poetess there is a sense of guilt over such an involvement conveyed by a metaphor 'convicts'..... The word 'earth' mentioned in the poem indicates the 'earthiness' as well as their 'reception of the heat' of the burning sun." (Diwedi, 2006: 67) But at the same time, Kamala Das expresses resentment towards her husband because he always called her wife but could not give the love affection which a wife expects from her husband. He had surely felt satisfied with the hugging her in the bed with the purpose to perform the physical act but could provide her artificial love. "She felt the extinction of her personality by the monstrous ego of her husband.... The free air outside the world shut its door and the air conditioner in her husband's room helped her a little." (Tilak, 2005, 146) Kamala Das has expressed frankly and outspokenly, her physical experiences with her husband. In her poem "The Old Playhouse", she writes:

"You were pleased
With my body's response, its weather, its usual shallow
Convulsions. You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed
My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices."

Das's definition of love and relationship is completely different because she opines that the basis of ideal love is its experience beyond sex. Even when she speaks about love in/outside marriage she is searching for the relationship which gives both emotional attachment and security that she failed to find. There are sometimes that the emotionless act of bodily union becomes an obsession which leads to annoyance and not the satisfaction. Addressing her husband in one of her poema "A Man is a Season", she writes:

"You let me use my youth like coins
Into various hands, you let me mate with shadows,
You let me sing in empty shrines, you let your wife
Seek ecstasy in others' arms."

Her poetry has always been the vehicle of the outlet of her feeling of frustration and for the purgation of her wounded soul. In fact the Kamala Das's poetry remove layer after layer over her frustrated self uninhibitedly. "The experiences in Das's love poems cannot be assessed at their face value. She writes of the pains and wounds of love,

of the final disillusionment, and very seldom of fulfillment in love.....Das poetry revolves around a hectic search for love. Indeed, what distresses her most is that too often lust is passed off as love. As she asserts with characteristically bitter candor that a woman can get into a man's heart only through his loins." (Ahmed, 2005: 79)

"The Stone Age" is another excellent poem in which stress results from the fact that love (physical love) is offered by another man besides her husband. The husband is depicted as an "old fat spider" who weaves "webs of bewilderment" and turns her into "a bird of stone, a granite dove". The lines of the poem become so powerful and assert:

".....Ask me, everybody, ask me,
What he sees in me, asks me why he is called a lion,
A libertine, ask me the flavor of his
Mouth, ask me why his hand sways like a hooded snake."

For Kamala Das an unemotional & retrained love seems to be no love at all; only a total emotional immersion in love can do justice. As a result love becomes the pervasive theme in her poetry and it is through love that she endeavors to discover her. And then later on she drifts towards spirituality in quest of her ideal love.

"Free from that last of human bondage I turned to Krishna. I felt that the show has ended and the auditorium was empty. Then He came, not wearing a crown, not wearing make-up but making a quiet entry. What is the role you are going to play, I asked Him. Your face seems familiar. I am not playing any role, I am myself, He said." (Das, 1977:195)

It is an imaginary dialogue between the speaker's soul and the Almighty. It may also be called as monologue. In fact, it is an account of the union of the finite to the infinite. Similar kind of expression can be found in Das's poem "A Man is Season" where the contrast between the temporal and permanent, the shadow and real is expressed. It is a fine comparison between the imperfect human lover and timeless, the eternal lover.

"A man is a season
You are eternity."

Das sometimes gives a mythical framework to her search for true and ideal love, and identifies it with the Radha-Krishna myth or with Mira Bai's abandoning the ties of marriage in search of Lord Krishna, the true lover as she expresses in her poem "Vrindavan":

"Vrindavan lives on in every woman's mind,
And the flute, luring her
From home and her husband."

In another poem entitled "Radha" she tries to feel some mystical experiences of Lord Krishna, her divine lover, she writes of herself:

And virgin crying,
Everything in me

Is melting, even the hardness at the core,
 O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting,
 Nothing remains but you.....”

Lord Krishna appears to her in myriad shapes and stays in her consciousness. She realizes that the relationship with men is as temporary but our eternal relationship is with Almighty God. God can be our divine lover. Kamala Das realizes that all her worldly lovers are the reflection of her eternal lover and that is God.

In another poem called “Ghanshyam”, she asserts that Ghanshyam (another name of Lord Krishna) is her ideal lover who occupies her heart. All her lovers are the shadows of her real lover that is God. She is also in intense love with Nature which is another name of God Krishna. All those things which are the form of Nature are symbolic of God. So either you love the things of Nature or the Nature in totality or God Krishna, all are the same and this is the only true love that is wished by every wise being :

“Ghanshyam
 You have like a koel built your
 Nest in the arbour of my heart,
 My life, until now a sleeping jungle,
 Is at last astir with music.”

The poet also rejects lust in one of her poems called “The Prisoner”. She tells that deceitful lust is mortal and is of no significance. A fine comparison has been done between prisoner and the woman involved in the sexual act. The prisoner is trapped in the jail and the woman is locked with her lover's body and wants get away from it. It means woman in this poem finds herself caught in the prison of desire and sexual hunger and wants to get out from this trap:

“As the convict studies
 His prison's geography,
 I study the trappings
 Of your body. Dear love,
 For I must someday find
 An escape from its snare.”

The poem also has spiritual meaning that soul is trapped in the physical boundaries. After sometime, the soul longs to leave the physical boundary and become free. Kamala Das realizes the difference between perishable and the imperishable. She says that Krishna is the ultimate reality and the human lover is just an illusion. “In Das human ties are seen as being accidental and confined only to this perishable body and hence inconsequential. The soul's union with God is the only kind of bond that is permanent.” (Ahmed, 2005: 97).

Kamala Das writes of the pains and sufferings, of disappointment and of fulfillment as well as acknowledging the Almighty God as her real & ideal lover. Trapped in the bitter relationship with an insensitive male, the poet escapes from

the material world to divinely spiritual world and finds the ultimate solace. In one of her most controlled poems “Request”, she writes:

“When I die,
Do not throw
The meat and bones away
But pile them up,
And let them tell
By their smell
What life was worth on this earth.
What love was worth in the end.”

This poem shows the sense of disgust of the bodily union. This poem is related to alienation and search of love which is incomplete, endless and eternal. Contrary to her passion with physicality, she affirms the need to look beyond the human flesh, transcend physicality and hence achieve the complete union with the God.

CONCLUSIONS

Kamala Das’s poetry represents a never-ending quest for identity – an identity that is lost. She sees marriage only an illusion in her material life where ideal love is of no significance. As Kamala Das concerns herself with the various facets of love, we witness a gradual change in her poetry. Her love poetry can be divided into diverse phases. In the first phase her obsession is with physical love, in the second phase her inclination is towards the emotional and true love where she desires security in relationship and in later part she drifts towards the eternal & infinite love. The poetic journey of Kamala Das is from physicality to frustration, from physical love to true & ideal love, from materialism to spiritualism and from human to divine. In fact Kamala Das portrays herself as a confessional poet who epitomize the modernization of the Indian Feminine psyche and searching for a relationship which gives her both peace, love and identity as well as proudly accepting herself as a woman who wishes to leave the superficial and find comfort with the real.

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